Film Review | “Sundarpur Chaos”: A cinematic exploration of Assam’s identity crisis

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October 31, 2024

The migration of people from Bangladesh (then East Bengal) into Assam dates back to the British colonial period. Encouraged under initiatives like the “Grow More Food” program, this influx, was intended to support the agricultural demands of the colonial government. The Assam Agitation aimed at protecting the rights of the indigenous Assamese population, rose in opposition to this unregulated migration. However, despite the Assam Accord signed nearly 40 years ago, the issue remains a central socio-political concern in the state.

Sundarpur Chaos, directed by Jhulan Krishna Mahanta and produced under RC Productions, was released on October 25th and delves into the pressing issue of illegal settlers encroaching on sacred Sattra lands, and sheds light on the wider intricate socio-political condition of the state. The film’s narrative and editing, also undertaken by Mahanta, portray a keenly observed story, brought to life by an ensemble cast, including Partha Pratim Hazarika (Kingkar Goswami), Silpi Dutta (Sanghamitra), Rajeev Goswami (Prankrishna Goswami), Jolly Laskar (Jeuti Goswami), Arun Nath (Sattradhikar), Gargee Dutta (Prarthana), Bonny Deori (Miki).

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The protagonist, Kingkar, is a young man motivated by a strong sense of community. Although labeled as the black sheep of his family due to his lackluster academic performance and seemingly unfocused social life, Kingkar's journey unfolds as he moves to Guwahati for further studies. He meets Sanghamitra, who presents him with challenges to orthodox beliefs. Caught between modern and traditional worlds, Kingkar grapples with his identity as he navigates through ideological conflicts. As he comes back to the village, he finds a mentor in Sattradhikar. With the guidance of the latter and a heightened awareness of the social issues plaguing his community, he embraces his responsibility to support and uplift his community.

The casting for *Sundarpur Chaos* is impressive, particularly in Kingkar's family. They embody the intricacies of Assamese familial relationships, portraying the pressures of tradition with nuance and authenticity. Rajeev Goswami, as Kingkar's father, plays a character firmly rooted in tradition, projecting authority and unyielding adherence to orthodoxy. Jolly Laskar, as Kingkar's mother, masterfully communicates maternal concern and quiet sorrow through her body language, embodying the silent endurance of a woman. The sibling rivalry and everyday familial interactions are convincingly real, making it easy to forget they are not an actual family but a cast of actors. Playing the character of Sanghamitra, Silpi Dutta impresses with her performance, while Bonny Deori brings a "bachelor student" vibe to life in an entertaining manner.

A significant strength of *Sundarpur Chaos* lies in its cinematography and music. Chandra Kumar Das's cinematography and Dr. Sourav Mahanta's background music enrich the film's emotional weight. Shaan's Achinaki Ei Sohor and Papon's Kirtan Ghoxa are enchanting. The soundtracks support the story seamlessly, adding depth without overpowering it, while Mahanta's editing keeps a steady pace that sustains engagement. The montage in the film maintains viewer engagement, adding a sense of intrigue. The humor in the film is organic, avoiding any reliance on trendy or trivial internet humor, instead drawing from life, which feels fresh and grounded in the film's context.

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The opening scene of Kingkar's silhouetted performance of a Sattriya dance is one of the standout scenes of the film. The scene, along with the accompanying music, effectively establishes the thematic tone of the film, emphasizing Kingkar's profound connection to his roots. The village's setting, with everyday scenes like playing carrom at the bus stop, using vine leaf to mend sandal straps, and earthy village roads, effectively mirrors life in rural Assam. The film deserves commendation for capturing these authentic details, which resonate with viewers familiar with Assam's village life.

Another profound aspect of the film is its nuanced portrayal of illegal settlers, humanizing their plight while addressing the broader implications of their presence in Assamese society. The film highlights the exploitation of these settlers by land mafias and political interest groups, as a pawn in their game of greed. The issue of rising crime and attacks affecting Sattra culture, influenced by external factors, is handled carefully, avoiding direct attribution to any specific community or individual, while leaving room for interpretation.

The film also includes some thought-provoking discussions on culture, society, and religion. An interesting allegory involving Radha-Krishna is used to depict Kingkar and Sanghamitra's relationship, subtly exploring themes of love. However, while the allegory initially felt natural, but when it is explicitly highlighted through zoomed-in visuals, it felt somewhat forced. Sanghamitra's question to Kingkar about whether his community would accept her—a Taekwondo-playing tribal girl—sparks deeper reflections on inclusivity within Assamese society. When Kingkar questions Sanghamitra about why every relationship needs a label, it reminded me of Dimple Kapadia's line in Dil Chahta Hai: "Kuch rishtey hote hain jinka koi naam nahi hota."

While the film largely succeeds in its narrative ambitions, it has occasionally resorted to convenient coincidences, which could have been easily avoided. The ending lacks the resolution needed for the complex issues it raises. One of the immediate afterthoughts after watching the film was that the director cautiously navigated to avoid stirring up any controversy. Perhaps too cautiously! This restraint, although understandable, left with a sense of an incomplete resolution. The film's conclusion, although open-ended, does not adequately merit the strong foundation it built throughout. It reminded me of the proverb "well begun is half done." Well, it is a "well begun" film, with a "half done" ending.

In conclusion, *Sundarpur Chaos* is a noteworthy film that tackles Assam's intricate socio-political issues with depth and sensitivity. Although its ending may feel restrained, the film makes a significant contribution to the conversation around Assamese identity and land conflicts, leaving the audience reflective and engaged with the issues it presents.